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RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3480
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2570
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7160
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4965
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1569
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002051

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AMBASSADOR TELLS FOREIGN MINISTER
GOVERNMENT LOSING HEARTS AND MINDS IN JAFFNA

REF: COLOMBO 2043

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador told Foreign Minister Samaraweera on December 11 that the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) is allowing the "Tamil Tigers" (LTTE) to exploit the serious humanitarian and human rights situation in Jaffna by alienating the local population from the government. While some of the military's actions might bring temporary advantage from a tactical point of view, in fact, the government was losing the allegiance of the people to the LTTE because of the government's actions. The Ambassador strongly recommended that the government rein in human rights violations by the security forces and paramilitaries operating with impunity in Jaffna. He also suggested several concrete measures to improve the humanitarian situation, but noted that the long-term solution would be to reopen the A-9 highway crossing to Jaffna peninsula. The LTTE has thus far rejected a temporary opening. End summary.

Humanitarian situation in Jaffna

12. (C) The Ambassador pointed out that of the 660,000 residents of Jaffna peninsula, an estimated 485,000 live below the poverty line and are dependent on government-run food programs. Residents credit the Government with managing to stock Jaffna with enough staples, such as rice and lentils, by ship. But civilians still face a nutritional deficit because of a lack of protein. What fruits and vegetables are available are prohibitively expensive for the average resident.

13. (C) Minister Samaraweera asked if it were not true that LTTE intimidation towards private shop keepers has kept their shops closed, ruling out that avenue for distribution. Ambassador responded that his interlocutors indicated there was "no doubt about it." However, the LTTE propaganda machine was adept at taking advantage of the situation the Tigers had helped create.

Livelihoods

14. (C) Civilians do not have the means to cope with the humanitarian situation post-August 11. Many of the agricultural fields are mined. Only a handful of Jaffna's 18,000 fishermen are allowed to fish because of concerns the LTTE will co-opt them, hide suicide boats among fishing boats, or use fishing trawlers to transport weapons or people. The military has begun efforts to allow some fishermen to fish in on-shore lagoons; but more fishermen must be allowed to fish in open water where catches will be greater. Few building materials have reached Jaffna since August 11, leaving laborers without work and forcing many NGOs to suspend some of their activities. A 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew limits work time for those who must travel far to work each day.

Human rights

15. (C) The Ambassador noted that even conservative observers estimate that more than 350 have been killed, 200 wounded and 300 missing due to extrajudicial killings and "white van" disappearances. Many of these take place after the government-imposed curfew, during which only the Army, Army intelligence, Karuna and EPDP cadres can operate freely. Embassy personnel witnessed security forces wearing black scarves over their faces during a cordon and search operation. Judicial authorities charged with investigating the incidents have received death threats, and are themselves frightened to come forward with evidence of human rights

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abuses by elements of the security forces and paramilitary groups. Of particular concern, the Ambassador emphasized, were human rights violations by the Sri Lanka Navy and paramilitary groups (Karuna and Eelam Peoples' Democratic Party, EPDP,) working in collusion with the security forces. The Ambassador recounted that several dozen teenage boys have surrendered to the Human Rights Commission, fearing abduction by "white van." These children prefer to seek safety in Jaffna prison rather than take their chances at home.

Losing Hearts and Minds

16. (C) The Government has a virtual lock on Jaffna, the Ambassador concluded, by controlling travel (25,000 civilians are awaiting military clearance to leave Jaffna), eliminating the use of cell phones, holding a virtual monopoly on supply of food and medicine, and suspending classes at Jaffna University. However, whatever advantage the government gains from its tactical control, the Ambassador said, it is losing the hearts and minds of the people of Jaffna and giving the LTTE a major opportunity to exploit the problems in Jaffna. He urged the GSL to respond to the challenge by stopping human rights abuses in the military, and by paramilitary groups such as Karuna and EPDP.

Need to respond to LTTE Propaganda

17. (C) On the humanitarian side, there is a need to dredge the port so the ships can pull directly up to the pier. There is a need to include non-food items, such as shelter materials, in sea shipments, he noted, and to ensure security for the UN and other agencies. In the final analysis, however, it was impractical to continue resupplying Jaffna by sea. The only way to make a permanent difference in the humanitarian situation was to re-open the A-9 highway, he said. The Ambassador acknowledged that the LTTE has blocked a temporary re-opening of the A-9, but the GSL and Co-Chairs must persevere.

Comment

18. (C) The Foreign Minister and acting Foreign Secretary De Silva (the only ones in the room) listened intently to the Ambassador's presentation. They appeared surprised by much of what we said since GSL officials typically paint a much more optimistic picture (although few, if any, venture to Jaffna). The Ambassador told the Foreign Minister he had shared the headlines of this presentation with Defense Secretary (and the president's brother) Gotabaya Rajapaksa,

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and asked whether he should make the same presentation to Basil Rajapaksa, another brother and key advisor to the president. Samaraweera thought that would be a good idea. We have an appointment request in.

BLAKE